

All Work and (Almost) No Play: College football's walk-ons fight to make an impact

by Wade Askew

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Kevin Frymire straddles a hip-wide rubber board and crouches into his stance, one foot in front of the other with a low center and dipped hips. He looks exceptionally average, and it seems the receiver's listed height and weight of 6'1" and 180 lbs may have been measured with helmet and cleats still on. Or maybe this impression is only the result of his standing only feet away from a crowd of behemoths otherwise known as a Division-I football team. Under his clean white No. 81 jersey, Frymire is just a notch below chiseled. His solid shoulders and cut biceps signify that he is in the condition required of a Big Ten athlete, but he will not intimidate anybody with his physique any time soon.

Maybe a foot across from Frymire a defensive back, who wears the same gleaming purple helmet but an opposite-colored jersey, stares into the receiver's facemask as he settles into his stance. A whistle blows, and like a pair of coiled springs they fire into each other, desperately fighting to push the other past the midpoint of the board.

The moment Frymire steps back to brace himself against the crash of his foe, the officiating coach blows his whistle and points to a crowd of black jerseys that includes walk-on safety James Nussbaum as they swarm their teammate. Meanwhile, a dejected Frymire frustratedly turns his brown eyes heavenward as a cluster of encouraging white jerseys engulfs him. His dark brown hair pokes out of his helmet and over his neck, beading with sweat despite the cool, pleasant breeze of this clear late-April Tuesday.

This organized fight, affectionately known as the "board drill," is repeated again and again under the newly born sun, now rising above a cluster of trees and homes a few yards beyond the east sideline of the FieldTurf. In what the barking head coach labels a "six-inch war," the simplest aspect of this paradoxically sophisticated yet undeniably barbaric sport of football, offense is repeatedly pitted against defense in a battle of pride and brute strength.

The drill is an adrenaline shot for the players, helping them forget that it's only 8:30 a.m., that many arrived at the practice facility tucked behind Ryan Field as many as two-and-a-half hours ago, joining the sparsely populated waking world through trips to the training, locker and meeting rooms. Perhaps most rewardingly, the board drill allows the players to ignore that a full day of classes awaits them. Now Frymire and his teammates can return to their most primal inner-selves, thrusting their bodies at each other to the roar of their teammates.

Later today these howling aggressors will enter the academic world, presumably with a bunch of classmates completely oblivious that their peers have been awake since as early as 5:00 a.m. and likely accomplished more by 9:30 than most college students do in a day (and these athletes aren't even "in-season"). For all 106 players on the roster, including the 84 who do not have the privilege of starting, this exhausting Tuesday scene is just another part of the college experience. For walk-ons like Frymire, now a redshirt junior who, unbeknownst to most fans, clawed his way to the top of the depth chart in the Spring, all of this comes without the reward of scholarship money.

"Budgeting time, being able to balance a lot of stuff, is the most difficult thing. Especially here, classes aren't easy," Frymire says with a chuckle, lounging on a beige

couch surrounded by empty beige walls in his off-campus living room. “But that's the deal, being an athlete.”

Unlike star running back Tyrell Sutton, who can look into the Ryan Field stands each Saturday and see his No. 19 jersey adding to the crowd's purple and white mosaic, Frymire's efforts are not rewarded by status, adulation or the attention of professional scouts (though he still hopes to achieve his dream of playing in the NFL). Instead, walk-ons like Frymire and Nussbaum work just as hard, and just as long, for quieter satisfactions. Theirs is football without the glory.

“Wake this shit up!” The urgent cry comes at precisely 7:29 a.m., or one minute before practice officially starts, from an anonymous source in the north end zone of the practice field. Players reported to the locker room at very least an hour ago, but as they file into lines organized by position and seniority, most could use the reminder.

Frymire and Nussbaum each merge into the middle of their lines, segregated on the east and west sides of the field by black and white jerseys. For now, they are as anonymous as the player serving as a human alarm clock.

This process of blending in is a skill that has to be learned by walk-ons once they arrive at Northwestern. Frymire re-wrote his high school's record books as a three-year starter and three-time all-area receiver in Burr Ridge's Nazareth Academy, located in the suburbs of Chicago. Nussbaum was twice named all-state and was a senior captain of Center Grove in suburban Indianapolis. But both came to Northwestern without scholarships, a distinction that merits second-class citizenship at some schools, and they both had to learn what it means to be a “role player.”

“The hardest part is the change from being *the* guy to *a* guy, going from being the guys who gets all the awards to the guy who nobody really knows about,” Nussbaum says. His brown eyes fixed on me as he described this somewhat traumatic transformation. “Just knowing that football is something you do, not who you are ... You can't define yourself by football. So that's been hard, just because for so much of my life it was easy to define myself by football and how well I did.”

The devolution from *the* guy to *a* guy, described as a “complete adjustment” and a “total 180,” has been difficult for Nussbaum. But it's also been something of a revelation, leading him to find an identity through faith instead of sport. As a competitor, he misses being relied on for his team's success. As a student, the process eases some of the challenges that come with being a football player on a college campus.

Nussbaum met me one afternoon in a café at the cavernous Northwestern library, an easy place to blend in as just another student. He spoke from a lime green arm-chair, his short brown hair and thoughtful eyes softening a square jaw, stubbly beard and sturdy shoulders. A plain long-sleeved gray t-shirt rolled up just beyond his elbows and a pair of black mesh shorts with thick red stripes down the sides covered his 6'2,” 215 lbs frame. Conspicuously absent were any clothes that contained the words “Northwestern Football” or even the recognizable “N-Cat” logo that adorns every varsity athlete's sweats.

Nussbaum explained that avoiding wearing the sweats to class allows him to escape a myriad of stereotypes that come with being a football player (most notably “academic prejudice,” the widespread perception from students and professors alike that athletes do not belong at the school academically. It is an attitude that coach Pat

Fitzgerald takes personal offense to, considering his team is among the nation's leaders in graduation rate and is coming off the best overall team GPA in school history). Nussbaum also counts the ability to play pickup basketball as one of the guys at the school gym as another perk of flying under the radar.

But it was on a gym floor in March that the safety was hit with a humbling reminder of his anonymity. In a three-on-three basketball tournament benefiting Special Olympics, Nussbaum joined fourth-string quarterback Joe Mauro, leading receiver Eric Peterman and a pair of offensive linemen on a team. Before their the tournament tipped off, his teammates, dressed in cut-off t-shirts and mesh shorts, shot casually into a basket among a crowd of chattering students.

In the conversation, a team of fraternity brothers warmed up at the same basket. Moments before the first game, a spectator inquired one of the brothers whom his team would face. The answer? Either the “football team” warming up on the opposite side of the court, including Sutton and 6'7” defensive end Corey Wootton, or “these guys.” Of course, “these guys” meant Nussbaum's team.

The walk-on safety quietly ignored the unintentional slight, but a more fiery Mauro asked if he didn't count as a team member. The fraternity brother grinned with embarrassment and politely asked what position Mauro played. But the damage was done, and after explaining that he played quarterback, a miffed Mauro returned to his warm-up. For the record, “these guys” won by four.

Frymire, too, must constantly deal with oversights. While he contends public acknowledgement means nothing to him, the receiver did concede that it can be “a little demeaning” when strangers ask if he is the kicker when out with his teammates. But with long wavy brown hair sweeping over his eyebrows and a scraggly, stubbly beard, Frymire does not look the prototypical part of *the* guy. He looks like a 21-year-old college student.

When asked if he would enjoy once again being *the* guy, a recognizable face of the team who would never suffer from such anonymity, Nussbaum answered in a word: *definitely*. “It's just like anything else: it's nice to be recognized for hard work and putting in a lot of time and going through all the hours we go through,” Nussbaum explains. “When people recognize that and give you your due props for it, it feels good.”

Even more difficult than the absence of recognition was the redshirt year that awaits most Division-I football players in their first year on campus. Redshirting is the ultimate process of present sacrifice for future gain; in return for not taking a snap during the season, an incoming freshman will receive a fifth year of eligibility. While both Nussbaum and Frymire recognize its merits, each could sum up the experience in two words: “It sucked.” In under a year, each player went from an every-down star to accepting a guarantee of no playing time as a freshman.

It was during this time that both players took on their first “role” as college athletes: the scout team. Each worked pridefully to give the starters realistic looks of an opposing offense or defense during the week, only to watch helplessly on Saturdays.

Frymire's role evolved into a spot on special teams, a position Nussbaum hopes to secure in his upcoming redshirt sophomore year. Fighting to reach the field for just a handful of critical yet unsung plays per game could not be more foreign to a player who once counted special teams plays as the only thing he would miss in an entire game.

“In high school I was on both sides of the ball, pretty much every play—never

played special teams because they didn't want me to get tired. And then now, it's aspiring *just* to play special teams," Nussbaum says, grinning at the painful irony. "It is different, and difficult to accept."

On a cool, clear late-April Saturday morning, Frymire gets his first chance to play a game as a Northwestern starter. It may be in a glorified scrimmage in front of a crowd that fills up maybe one-eighth of Ryan Field, but the walk-on capitalizes on the opportunity with a 12-yard reception on just the fourth play of the game.

He casually leaves the ball for a referee, looking supremely relaxed in his knee-high black socks and skin-tight three-quarter length sleeves that emerge from his white jersey, now with its first grass stain of the day. The absence of any reaction and an easy jog back into position signify that this is one of many catches in a long career; Frymire has one career catch, a 15-yarder against Eastern Michigan. A polite clap from the small purple-clad contingent and the announcement of the receiver's name over the public address system fill the stadium as an oblivious Frymire scans the sideline for the next play called.

For players like Frymire and Nussbaum, every practice and scrimmage represents a chance to get notice, an opportunity to earn some of the playing time and recognition that has eluded them. The transformed goals and expectations of a backup render even a scrimmage four months before summer training camp important. It's those daily goals that Dr. Jeffrey Fishbein, a sports psychologist who has worked with Northwestern athletes for five years, holds vital to an athlete's motivation.

"I repeat a lot the notion of 'you never know,'" Fishbein says. "I try to teach them to find a purpose to go out there on a daily basis and achieve something. And achieving may or may not be getting on the field or playing. They all want to, but those who aren't fortunate enough to play or start on a consistent basis have to find other goals to achieve and other purposes to play for."

Fishbein, a thoughtful psychologist with a cleanly shaved head, works with athletes primarily in performance enhancement. He also conducts therapy sessions for off-field issues that may hinder on-field play, such as academic stress, mood disorder and family problems. He described his approach while watching the Florida Marlins play in New York against the Mets on TV; Fishbein is working his seventh season with the Marlins after three seasons consulting with the Montreal Expos.

As he watched his team from afar, Fishbein equated the experience of an incoming freshman to that of a Marlin who, after a long career as an everyday player, was asked to fill the spotty role of pinch hitter. Like the pinch hitter, a freshman faces an array of challenges, from both the practical standpoint of new preparation routines to the emotional difficulty of no longer being constantly depended on.

"They lose confidence almost immediately. It's a little surprising because they were all top top-notch, elite level athletes who have really forgotten how good they are," Fishbein says of the back-ups. "Belief in themselves, the level of confidence, that can affect self-worth, self-esteem, that can affect their level of motivation."

Athletes like Nussbaum who recognize the need to be seen as "a person who plays football" instead of just a "football player," as Fishbein puts it, tend to deal better with this question of self-worth. However, that does not make them immune to other stresses

that come with being a Division-I athlete. The massive time commitment is blind to attitude, playing time and natural ability.

Both Frymire and Sutton cited time management as the greatest challenge facing a college athlete. That much is evident on an average Tuesday morning in April, when Frymire sits bleary-eyed outside a meeting room at 6:30. His fellow receivers surround him, some sprawled on the dark gray carpet, thick black playbooks in hand, while others, such as Peterman, mosey around the building's open lobby with a striking energy that defies the hour.

In half an hour many will sleepwalk and some will skip to the practice field and warm up; by 7:30 a.m. they are expected to be locked in for a mentally and physically draining two-hour practice. This is only the beginning of what often becomes a 16-hour day, with class and homework awaiting after practice. For Frymire and Nussbaum, the long hours have not brought with them the recognition that Sutton enjoys.

While it may be an extreme case for walk-ons, this phenomenon of hard work without thanks or tangible results is not unique to just football players. Fishbein draws parallels to both the “what-have-you-done-for-me-lately” business world, which clears a salesman's accomplishments every Jan. 1, and his own field of psychology, in which therapy does not always equate psychological improvement.

Still, neither Fishbein nor coach Fitzgerald pity the athletes. They did, after all, sign up for the commitment. At the same time, both Fitzgerald and Sutton say they admire walk-ons who devote themselves to the team without the instant gratification of playing time. They “don't even get paid for this kind of thing” like scholarship athletes, Sutton points out. The running back describes the life of a back-up as a grind, a constant “test” to be ready to step in for a starter should he be needed.

Fitzgerald, a 6'2” former middle linebacker, oozes a passion for football from his very pores both as he sweeps across the practice field shouting commands and encouragement and later when officiating his beloved “six-inch war,” otherwise known as the board drill. He has the remarkable ability to single-handedly energize an entire team and works to keep his players' spirits up after the board drill, smacking a laminated sheet while repeatedly shouting, “Let's go!”

He also knows plenty about life as a Northwestern athlete, as he was arguably the heart of the team's fabled run to the 1995 Rose Bowl. As a freshman and sophomore at Northwestern, the unheralded Fitzgerald was a special contributor and back-up linebacker on a pair of teams that went a combined 5-16-1. But in the next two years, the same athlete from the Southside of Chicago who was spurned by his dream school, Notre Dame, earned a pair of national defensive player of the year awards in two Big Ten championship seasons.

“What was it like to just the guy wearing [jersey number] 51 to everyone knowing your name?” Fitzgerald reflects, his two boys under the age of five giggling in the back seat of his car. His crew-cut black hair, wide chest and thick neck lend the impression that he could still suit up if the Wildcats ever needed another linebacker. “It's humbling. It really is. It's humbling to know the impact that you can have.”

Both Fitzgerald and Sutton, who only completed a 1,474-yard Freshman All-America season only after a pair of running backs suffered injuries by the first game of 2005, are poster boys of Fishbein's “you never know” approach. It is preparing for the mere *opportunity*, not the accolades, that is one of the greatest transformations for

athletes out of high school. While such an approach eventually garnered the coach and the running back more awards in a single year than most players earn in a career, the harsh reality is that such overwhelming success rarely awaits a walk-on. And even if it does, adversity can strike.

Two plays after his catch in the Spring Game, Frymire did exactly what he was supposed to do. Blocking 20 yards down-field during a Sutton run, the receiver exerted the same unsung extra effort that has taken him from anonymous walk-on to potential starter. Only football aficionados notice a receiver's blocking skills, but after this play Frymire would have the entire stadium's attention.

As Sutton barreled down the left hash mark, a defender tackled him from behind, launching the helpless tailback nose-first into Frymire's right leg. The receiver collapsed like an imploding tower but quickly hopped to his feet in a prideful, noble and ill-advised attempt to exit the field under his own power. Two yards later, Frymire collapsed as quarterback C.J. Bachér waved to the sideline for help. Soon, five trainers and Fitzgerald surrounded the fallen receiver, the coach looming behind the trainers as they crouched over Frymire, partially shielding him from the view of anxious teammates and a concerned crowd.

Only a humming murmur and the clanging of empty flag-posts above the stands broke the silence of an otherwise hushed stadium. Laying on his back as trainers worked methodically to fit the leg to an air-cast, Frymire knew something was wrong. The pain was not too intense—for a football player, at least—but from the moment Sutton crashed into his lower leg, Frymire felt the bone come out of alignment. “Not now, this can't be happening,” he thought. “This is something that can't be going bad *now*.”

But it was. After being lifted on a stretcher, he sat upright in a cart that whisked him off the field and into the locker room as his squinting eyes lingered on the scrimmage for a moment before turning forward. A blank, somber expression overcame his face while his long brown hair, damp even though he ran just six plays, was slicked in its familiar game-time Steve Nash-style position behind the ears.

The injury, officially a broken fibula (in three places) and pair of torn ligaments, is only a bitter twist in the uphill battle that has been Frymire's college career. He hopes to return just in time for training camp in August. Though he will contend for a starting role, the underdog edge that fuels the junior will likely only be strengthened by the injury.

“I've always felt like I have a chip on my shoulder,” Frymire says from his bare living room, his foot propped on a pair of mismatched pillows stacked on the glass top of a wooden coffee table. “I try to prove people wrong, prove to people I do belong here. I'd say that's what's set me apart, that's my drive every day.”

Frymire's is an attitude that Fitzgerald appreciates, but attitude alone does not guarantee playing time. Though Americans love the underdog story, the harsh reality dictates that God-given ability counts for something—not everything, but something. That is why players like Nussbaum have learned to transform their expectations.

“Being realistic, I know I'm not the best athlete on the team, and with two [starting] safeties coming back, I know I'm not going to beat either of those guys out,” Nussbaum says, perhaps a little pained to face up to his own athletic mortality. “I think

part of my role is helping younger guys—we have a couple freshmen who are really good athletically—just helping them learn the schemes, learn the coverages as best they can.”

Just as Nussbaum has shed a degree of personal aspiration for the good of his younger teammates, Frymire's black cast, hiding beneath a pair of matching sweatpants as he laboriously crutches the five yards from front door to couch in his home, is a constant testament to the sacrifices he has made. But as selfless as he and Nussbaum may be, the walk-ons and back-ups of college football will continue to fight day by draining day, seeking to regain the form that made them high school stars.

That is why, months from now and with a healthy leg, Frymire will again straddle a rubber board early in the morning, the sun beaming just inches above the tree-line. His helmet will glisten with the distinct purple that proclaims his status as a Division-I athlete and the offense at his back will bark fiercely in an attempt to up his adrenaline levels.

As the chirping of his teammates joins that of the awakening birds, Frymire will once again explode into the torso of another friend-turned-temporary-enemy. He'll heave his body, using every ounce of strength, from his heels to the tips of his gloved fingertips, just to move another player half a foot. The struggle will be short but intense, his eyes squinting and jaw clenched for the battle.

But maybe, just maybe, when the whistle blows this time, Frymire will look up in relief, his face relaxing into a familiar nonchalant grin that reveals a quiet confidence. “I feel like I'd proven myself that I can definitely start out there,” he says. “I can play out there, I can make plays, all that.”

The board drill triumph will be a small victory, but a victory nonetheless. And in that moment, customarily hidden from media and fans, he will once again prove the one simple fact that he fights for each day of his college life.

He belongs.